A MESSAGE FROM LEBANON

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A MESSAGE FROM LEBANON

Blessed RAFQA (REBECCA)
Maronite nun

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POSTULAZIONE GENERALE
DELL'ORDINE LIBANESE MARONITA

P. Basile HACHEM
Postulatore

A message for our times

Before the conclusion of the extraordinary jubilee of the Year of the Redemption, the Holy Father John Paul II addressed an Apostolic Letter to the Pastors and the children of the whole Church on the Christian meaning of human suffering (*Salvifici doloris,* 11 February 1984). The mystery of the Redemption is, in fact, the mystery of the suffering and death of Christ, the Son of God, for the salvation of mankind: an abyss of suffering as the irrefutable proof of infinite love.

The new Blessed whom the Church holds up for the admiration and imitation of the People of God, is an exceptional example of the discovery, by a simple and fragile creature, of the salvific value of suffering shared with Christ.

The Pope's Letter must have surprised many. To speak about suffering as the path to salvation and a source of joy to a world that does not admit it must suffer and frenetically pursues the pleasures of life, refusing no experience, even the most base, must have seemed like a voice in the wilderness. However, despite the race of science to achieve the ambitious goal of defeating every disease, sorrow, which causes anguish and humiliates the human creature in body and in mind, remains inseparable from existence.

There are also those who see in the presence of evil and suffering in the world a sign of God's absence or indifference towards man's tragedies. The disturbing story of Blessed Rebecca is an eloquent example of the discovery, in the light of the Gospel of the Cross, of suffering as being no longer the implacable enemy.

The village of Himlaya

A daughter of Lebanon

Rebecca is the symbolic daughter of a country which for over a decade has been in the world headlines because of its suffering. A land laden with history and of rare natural beauty, mentioned more than sixty times in God's Book — the Bible — as a synonym of magnificence. Lebanon is the only country outside Palestine in which Jesus was a guest during his days on earth and the only one which inspired the Liturgy of the Church to sing — using the words of the Bible — the divine and human splendours of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In Blessed Rebecca's time Lebanon still preserved its ancient aspect and included the mountainous part of the country, inhabited by a proud and gentle Christian population who lived their faith intensely in the shade of churches,

sanctuaries and monasteries, deeply devoted to their "Lady" Mary, passionately invoked as *Arzat Lybnan:* Cedar of Lebanon.

The Arabic baptismal name of the Blessed is Boutrossieh (Pierina). She was born about the year 1832 in the village of Himlaya, near Bifkaya, about 700 metres up in the mountains. Her family, was Maronite Christian, that is it belonged to the one Eastern Church which had never had a branch broken from the Apostolic See of Rome.

The Maronites take their name and draw their historical and religious origins from St. Maro, a IVth century Syrian monk, whose disciples were champions of Catholic orthodoxy and highly esteemed for their virtue and wisdom.

The origins of the Maronite Patriarchate go back to the VIIth century when St. Maro's Christians and monks, in order to escape the oppression of Arab domination which protected the heretics, took refuge in Lebanon, settling in the deserted and inaccessible mountains, transforming them from a "goats' refuge" to a luxuriant garden.

The Patriarch, whose title is Patriarch of Antioch and of All the East, has always been the indisputed head, the defender of justice and freedom for his people, whose history is often an epic. The Maronite people who migrated to Lebanon kept their original aspect of a community which shares the life the monks down through the centuries.

Before dying, Blessed Rebecca herself recounted to Sister Ursula, the superior of the monastery in which she died, the salient facts of her childhood and youth, commencing thus: "There is nothing important in my life that is worthy of being recorded", because, for saints, what matters is their inner life. "My mother — she continued — died when I was seven years old. After her death, my father married for a second time". A childhood with a great emptiness in heart, which her step-mother never succeded in filling. In the East, girls are

precociously mature for marriage and there were some who were concerned about having Pierina settle down: "When I was fourteen my step-mother wanted me to marry her brother and my maternal aunt wanted me to marry her son". An arranged marriage, as was then the custom, care being taken not to go outside the family. Very often Blessed Rebecca's life and the language she used have the savour of the Bible because of a certain connaturality of expression and customs.

"My refusal to agree caused aversion and enmity, One day when I was returning home with a pitcher (I had been drawing water from the fountain), I heard my step-mother and my aunt insulting one another and saying hurtful words, all because of me, for each of them wanted me to get married as she thought fit. I was saddened because of the arguments that had arisen over me. I went away, depressed by sadness and sorrow, and asked God to free me from these evil steps. I suddenly had the idea of becoming a nun and went straight to the convent of Our Lady of Liberation at Bifkaya which belonged to the Mariamette Sisters, known also to the people as the Sisters of Jesus".

At the time of this account Blessed Rebecca had been a nun for many years and was in the position to consider the events of her early years from a perspective of grace. Her decision to escape from home was not a caprice nor an irresponsible brainstorm but an act of courage to follow her true inclination. Becoming a nun was not the way to settle differences between people she held in respect: in order to do this it would have been sufficient to chose one of the two suppliants for her hand, or perhaps even choose a third, and then all the arguments would have ceased.

The courage of deciding

Blessed Rebecca drew a veil of silence over other particulars of her life prior to 1853 when she became a nun, because she considered them irrelevant. About 1840, because of political and religious troubles, the situation in Lebanon became very unsettled and Pierina was sent to Damascus, to the house of a couple of Lebanese origin; she returned to Lebanon in fact because of her marriage prospects. But time went by and Pierina still had not decided, despite other good offers. One day when a boy asked her for a date she answered that they could see each other near the church: a sybilline way of telling him that he could meet her only at her funeral. She left her father's house when she came of age and it is from this point that she takes up her autobiographical account again: "On the road, I met three girls and said to them: I am going to the convent of Our Lady of Liberation to become a nun, do you want to come with me and embrace the religious life? Two of them said yes, the third said: I will come when I see that you have persevered in the convent". It is clear she was speaking about friends whose feelings she knew. "The three of us went to the convent. When I entered the church I felt immense joy, inner relief, and looking at the image of the Blessed Virgin I felt as if a voice had come from it and penetrated the most intimate part of my conscience. It said to me: You will be a nun".

Blessed Rebecca was a secret soul; most discreet in her confidences and other than inclined to embellish or exaggerate facts; the episode she recounts has, at the least, the significance of the total awareness and satisfaction with which she had taken the step.

Going from the church to the convent parlour, the girls asked to see the superior to tell her of their wishes. "The superior said to me: Welcome; she held my hand and led me

into the convent, then turning to the other two she told them to come back later and they also would be received. I was amazed that the superior accepted my request immediately without asking me any questions and I attributed this to the image of Our Lady of Liberation I had seen in the church". But her family did not behave like this: "When my father heard that I had run away from home and gone into a convent he and his wife came after me. He asked the superior for permission to see me, to take me back home. The mistress of novices came to me and said: your mother and your father have come to take you home. I answered: I would prefer my mother to take me rather than leave the convent. Surprised by this reply, the sister asked me: What do you mean? I answered: My mother is dead, the woman who is with my father is his wife". There is no need to turn to fantasy to see in these words a great yearning and almost jealous nostalgia for her true mother and the implicit understanding that she would have understood her. It also seems clear that her step-mother had been unable to win her confidence or even less that she had given up her plans for arranging a marriage.

Pierina was immovable: "I asked the mistress of novices to excuse me from seeing them and she agreed. They returned home, saddened, and since then I never saw them again throughout my whole life as a religious". In fact, they disappeared from her life. Pierina never says that she refused to see them; they would have been able to do so without any trouble after her religious profession, but perhaps her father and her step-mother never had the opportunity to visit her or had gone away peacefully in face of her resolve. If it had been Pierina who had wanted a clean break, one could think that she did so in order to avoid useless and painful discussions, but it is more likely that it was Jesus' severe warning to someone who intended to follow Him after having taken leave of his family: "no one who sets his hand to the plough and then

keeps looking back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Lk. 9, 62).

In Rebecca's life strength of mind, made invincible by divine grace, is a characteristic that emerges to the point of heroism.

The first experience of religious life

At the time of Blessed Rebecca, religious institutions that devoted themselves to the full time education and religious instruction of girls were practically inexistent. This was provided for in Bifkaya, thanks to the generosity of the parish priest, Fr. Joseph Gemayel, and his family who founded a new religious institute for women whose task was teaching and the religious education of girls. The title of the institute was "Mariamât of the Immaculate Conception". Mariamât is the Arabic plural of the name Mariam, signifying "Daughters of Mary"; in French, the common language in Lebanon: *Mariamettes.* On the 1st January 1853, Father Gemayel recorded the foundation of the institute and the names of the first four aspirants in a note-book. The last was Pierina, then aged twenty-one.

On the 9th February 1855, the feast of St. Maro, she commenced her noviciate in Ghazir convent, chosing as her name in religion Anissa, Agnes.

In 1856 she took her first vows, renewable every year. Initially Pierina, now Sister Anissa, was in charge of the kitchen and was studying in preparation for teaching the rudiments of culture. Still a novice, but already at an age that could be described as mature, she was placed in charge of the workers and had the task of giving them religious instruction in a spinning-mill in Scerbanieh, where she remained for two months. After her final vows she was sent to the eastern seminary of Ghazir, founded and run by the Jesuits. In 1860

she went to southern Lebanon, to Deir-el-Qamar, to the same Fathers. "That year — she recounted — there were the well-known battles and bloody massacres".

These terse words cover one of the recurring tragedies of Lebanon and recall the most recent, in 1975-1976. Half of the country was put to the sword and set on by the Druse sect which, goaded on by the Turks, the masters of Lebanon for more than four centuries, persecuted the Christian Maronites in the mountains to the point of death. In less than two months they killed 7,771 victims, destroyed 360 villages, 560 churches, 28 schools and 42 convents.

During the persecution, almost all the "Mariamettes" took refuge in Deir-el Qamar, where "blood flowed like water in the streets". Blessed Rebecca recounted a terrifying episode of her participation in the tragedy which gave her a crude experience of human suffering: "One day when I was in the town I saw some soldiers following a child to catch him and strangle him. When the child saw me he ran towards me and I hid him under my skirt, saving him from the barbarity and cruelty of the soldiers". To keep the girls in the school safe, the Jesuits dressed about fifteen of them in religious habits and put them up in their class-rooms.

Two years later, Blessed Rebecca was transferred to the coast, to Gebail — the ancient Byblos — where she remained for a year, and then to the village of Ma'ad in the same district; this was at the request of a local dignitary, Antoun (Anthony) Issa, who was married but had no children. Rebecca was given lodgings in the house of this old couple who held her dear. One pupil who was six years in Sister Anissa's school affirmed that she was always tranquil, serene, sensitive and smiling in her humility; she never raised her voice and counter to teaching methods of those days she never used corporal punishment, preferring to master her lively pupils with sweetness and persuasion. She taught Christian doctrine and supervised

religious practice simply and efficiently; she accompanied the girls to services in church, teaching them to participate knowingly and with devotion. The pupils were very attached to their mistress and were impatient to go to school. There was never a disagreement with the girls or with their parents who were happy to entrust their daughters to safe hands and a loving heart.

A new path

In 1871, the "Mariamettes'" religious institute went through a grave crisis. The Jesuit Fathers decided to found another, equally dependent on them. As always happens, the decision gave rise to differences with the result that both congregations were dissolved.

Blessed Rebecca, who was then in Ma'ad, gives the sequence of events as follows: "When I learned that the Jesuits had gone away and that some of the sisters had returned to the world because of the persecution and the terrible dangers, I was very perplexed and worried. I went into St. George's church to pray, weeping and sighing and asking God to indicate a sure path to me. As a result of my praying I fell asleep with my head resting on my hands. During my deep sleep I felt an invisible hand touching my shoulders and a voice, I did not know where it came from, saying to me: I will make a religious of you. I woke up, looked around the church and also outside but saw no one. I was returning home when I met Antoun Issa who seeing me sad and in tears asked: What's wrong? I answered: You know what happened about the Jesuits and the sisters who depend on them. There is nothing more for me to do than enter the Baladita Order". The monastic order, now named "The Lebanese Maronite Order of St. Anthony" was founded in 1695 taking as its inspiration the

ancient Egyptian monasticism initiated by St. Anthony Abbot at the beginning of the IVth century and other great masters of eastern monasticism. The name "Baladita" comes from the Arabic *bled,* mountain, and refers to Lebanon. The Order also has a women's branch which depends on the mens' Order and has the same Rule.

The situation of his guest weighed heavy on the heart of the saintly Antoun Issa who asked her to stay in his house in order to continue her school work until the end of the year; he could have been thinking about the future when he told her that he would leave her property and sufficient money to relieve her of any worry. "Thanking him for his kindness, I refused to follow his advice: I prefer at all cost, I told him, to enter into religious life". In addition, she had the confirmation of the mysterious voice. When Antoun Issa saw that she was firm in her decision he did not dare to insist nor even less to abandon her to her destiny, offerting to facilitate her way, himself paying the "dowry" demanded by the Order.

"The night of that very day on which I had that conversation with him — Blessed Rebecca continues — I saw three men in a dream. The first had a white beard and was carrying a lectern-stick (a long stick in the shape of the letter T on which the monks leaned during the liturgical readings); the second was dressed like a soldier; and the third was an old man. The old man approached me and touching me with his stick said: Become a nun in the Baladita Order; he took another step forward, touched me again and said: Become a Baladita nun. I woke up very happy and when day broke I went to Antoun Issa, bursting with joy. When he saw me he said: How did you get up this morning? I see happiness on your face! I said this was true and told him about my dream".

The good and devoted Antoun believed he could and should identity the people who had appeared to Sister Anissa: "The monk is St. Anthony of Qozhaia (St. Anthony Abbot);

the soldier is St. George, to whom the church in Ma'ad is delicated. The interpretation was correct and the third man could only be a Baladita monk. Encouraged, Sister Anissa took the ball on the re-bound: "I told him about my desire to go without delay to the monastery of Mar-Sem'an (St. Simon) in Al-Qarn; but he insisted that I should complete my years in Ma'ad and delay my entry to the monastery until the following year. God, I told him, inspired me and I should go immediately". Once again Antoun Issa reached the heights of his generosity: he gave her the sum he had promised, adding a letter of recommendation to the archbishop who immediately wrote to the superior general of the Baladita Order entrusting the "little lamb" to her, which at once saw the doors of the noviciate thrown open wide.

Finally the target

On the 12th July 1871, when she was thirty-nine years old, Blessed Rebecca began from the start, this time certain that she had reached her goal. Two years later, on the 25th August 1873, she solemnly professed her perpetual vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in the spirit of the strict Rule of the Baladita Order, a school of saints. The new name in religion of the Blessed was, and for always, that of her unforgettable mother: Rifqa (or Rafça),[1] Rebecca, the name in the Bible of Abraham's great grand-daughter and wife of his son Isaac.

[1] In the Arabic language vowels rarely have a decisive and definite sound, often becoming shaded into a semi-vowel, and are transcribed in a great variety of ways. The transcription of Arabic names and terms reflects the French pronunciation which we have adapted to Italian pronunciation for greater facility.

The monastery of Mar-Sem'an

Rebecca remained in the monastery of St. Simon in El-Qarn for about twenty-six years, until 1897.

The public at large has only a very vague idea of life in an enclosed convent in which the rhythm of day and night is punctuated hour by hour with physical tasks that cannot be postponed. Seen, or rather imagined, from outside, it is a monotonous, restricted and, at worst, a depressing life, because one does not take into account free choice and the help of God's grace. To many, it is even a flight from social responsibilities, a useless and wasted life. This hasty and unjust judgement, besides being the result of ignorance, springs from fatal incomprehension. Of the Holy Spirit, the author of the dynamism of spiritual life, Jesus said: "The world cannot

receive him, because the world neither sees nor knows him" (Jn. 14, 17); and about the "natural man" who does not see beyond his brief earthly horizon and is not animated by the Spirit of God, St Paul wrote: "A man who is unspiritual refuses what belongs to the Spirit of God; it is folly to him; he cannot grasp it, because it needs to be judged in the light of the Spirit" (I Cor. 2, 14). The problem is all here.

Those who go into a monastery enter effectively into another world, to see, as St. Augustine says, with the "inner eye, in a vision of faith".

The monastic Rules which Sister Rebecca had vowed to obey were approved by Pope Clement XII in 1732. In them the day in the monastery was divided up as follows: winter and summer, the bell for getting up rang at four o'clock in the morning to signal the start of the new day with prayer, meditation, Holy Mass, and choral office, all lasting for about three hours. At seven o'clock each nun occupied herself with the task assigned to her to guarantee the smooth running of community life. At ten o'clock, in church once again for the singing of the Breviary, or as it is now called: the Liturgy of the Hours. This was followed by breakfast. At midday, the Breviary once again, then a pause for the community reading of a spiritual book and pious conversation, the favourite topic of which was the life of the Blessed Virgin and of the saints, so that the nuns could reflect on their virtues. In eastern tradition the masters 'par excellence' of monastic spirituality were the Desert Fathers to whom is owed the spreading of monasticism in the IIIrd and IVth centuries. They were the "athletes" of the spirit who faced epic struggles and did almost legendary penance in order to remain faithful in the service of God. Their precepts of supernatural wisdom and very delicate psychology were an irreplaceable example. Alongside the ancient classics of eastern tradition, the Maronite monks willingly placed those western examples, with a preference for the works of St.

Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori, translated into Arabic.

The wisdom of the saint is learned only at the school of the saints, who, at whatsover time they lived and to whatever culture they belonged, were nourished by the lymph of the Gospel, that the Apocalypse calls "eternal". (14,6).

At two o'clock in the afternoon they recited Vespers and then went for supper. There were only two meals each day, with an exception made for the sick; the superior could also allow them to have meat which was forbidden to those who were healthy. Half an hour after sunset, evening prayers from the Breviary, followed by the "great silence"; the nuns retired to their cells to rest until midnight when they came out to go to church to sing the first part of the Breviary that lasted until half past one in the morning and, during Lent and Holy Week, until two o'clock. Many of the sisters preferred to remain in church in prayer and meditation waiting to be called at four o'clock. The rest of the time was occupied by different kinds of work, following the basic monastic maxim: "Pray and Work".

A strange request to God

A true daughter of Lebanon, Rebecca was a fine-looking woman, pale complexioned, a good carriage and rather plump: the picture of the health at the age of fifty-three.

In 1885, she wrote in her autobiographical account "one day the nuns from St. Simon's wanted to go for a little walk around the monastery. It was the first Sunday of the Rosary (that is the first Sunday of the month of October, dedicated to the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin). I did not accompany them. Before leaving each of the nuns came and said to me: Pray for me sister. There were some who asked me to say seven decades of the Rosary, others five, etc. I went into the church and started to pray. Seeing that I was in good health and that I had

never been sick in my life, I prayed to God in this way: Why, O my God, why have you distanced yourself from me and have abandoned me? You have never visited me with sickness! Have you perhaps abandoned me?".

No one could have imagined such a "protest" if Blessed Rebecca had not repeated her prayer word for word; it takes one's breath away.

What can make a person complain to God because He has "abandoned" her in good health, almost as if this were an insupportable punishment? And it is at this point that we discover the secret, to us quite terrible, of her heroic virtues that went beyond the bounds of imagination. One of Rebecca's colleagues tells us that in the monastery there was an old blind sister and that Rebecca often reflected like this: "The Good God tests my sisters, some with blindness, others with sickness, and spares only me".

The "visit from the Lord" is a typical biblical expression to indicate God's special, personal attention to his creatures. It can mean an explicit and severe intervention to lead back sinners to the correct path or a demonstration of mercy in favour of the elect. In the Apocalypse (3,20) Jesus says: "Here I stand, knocking at the door"; Sister Rebecca thought that she had been waiting too long, perhaps because the divine Visitor felt that he had seen her closing the door in his face.

The mystery of suffering

Rebecca read and meditated on the Sacred Scriptures every day and was not unaware that God had asked Abraham, her "friend", for proof that was in appearance cruel: he had to kill and burn as a holocaust his only son, Isaac, in whom he had placed all his hopes and love, to demostrate his unlimited obedience to God (cf. Jn. 22,18). It is true that God stayed the

hand of her friend Abraham at the right moment, but Abraham was not drawn back. Throughout the whole day Rebecca saw Jesus before her eyes and held him in her heart; Jesus who "humbled himself, and in obedience accepted even death — death on a cross" (Phil. 2,8), involving in his torment his Virgin Mother (cf. Lk. 2,35). He, who on the eve of his sacrifice lay down his life for his friends" (Jn. 15,13). In fact, the great secret of the Cross is love: "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, that anyone who has faith in him may not die but have eternal life" (Jn. 3,16). In his Letter on the Christian meaning of suffering, the Pope comments: "These words... introduce us into the very heart of God's salvific work... Salvation means liberation from evil and for this reason it is closely bound up with the problem of suffering... God gives his Son to "the world" to free man from evil, which bears within itself the definitive and absolute perspective of suffering. At the same time, the very word "gives" ("gave") indicates that this liberation must be achieved by the only-begotten Son through his own suffering and in this, love is manifested, the infinite love both of that only-begotten Son and of the Father who for this reason "gives" his Son. This is love for man, love for the "world": it is salvific love". (*Salvific doloris*, no. 14).

In her conversations with the sisters in her community, Rebecca used to say: "It is necessary to open one's ears to the divine words and to the discourses of the saints, so that nothing escapes; rather, it is necessary for the words to work here" and she pointed to her brow. Jesus said that the Word of God is like a seed and if it falls on good ground produces much fruit (cf. Lk. 8,15). One does not reflect enough on the fact that for the believer the Gospel is not a book only to read, but a book to be lived, the only book that requires being lived to understand God and oneself, so as not to live in vain. The prayer-lament of Sister Rebecca is not an expression of

aberrant psychology, of longed-for suffering, but a response of love to Crucified Love. Nor was it a moment of unreasonable exaltation, but the logical conclusion of years and years of prayer, of reflection at the foot of the Cross, of a never-ending journey on the way to perfection and the sublime. And if it was foolishness, it was, in accordance with St. Paul's definition, the "foolishness" of the Gospel of the Cross, but "Divine folly is wiser than the wisdom of man, and divine weakness stronger than man's strength" (1 Cor. 1, 18.25).

And God responded

Rebecca's account to her superior concluded with these words: "At the moment of sleeping (the night after her prayer), I felt a most violent pain spreading above my eyes to the point that I reached the state you see me in, blind and paralysed, and as I myself had asked for sickness I could not allow myself to complain or murmur".

It only remains for us to follow the different stages of the Blessed's Calvary, being careful not to feel sorry for her as we would be doing her wrong.

To one sister who asked her what was the cause of her sickness, she replied: "I first of all thought it was an inflammation of the eye, but when my sickness and the pain took root, I recalled that I had asked God to visit me with sickness as a sign of His mercy to me, and he answered my prayer. That is why I give thanks to him because he gave me what was best for me and most useful for the salvation of my soul". Deeply devoted to the Blessed Virgin, she also said that when we look at Our Lady of Sorrows we have no right to complain.

The same sister tells that when she was very young, taken into the monastery as an orphan, with the chaplain she

accompanied Rebecca to Tripoli on the Lebanese coast for a medical visit. The doctor explored, "poking one eye, then the other". Blood gushed out and I wept with compassion, but she remained calm and smiling, repeating: "In communion with your suffering, Jesus!". And seeing me in tears she said: "It is I who am suffering, why are you crying?". It seemed she didn't feel any pain. Two or three days later, the sore became inflamed and for about a month there was a copious discharge of pus".

On her return to the monastery, Blessed Rebecca did not have a day of respite. Her right eye swelled up and was almost coming out of its socket, while her left one became inflamed and misted over. For two years the pain, particularly in her right eye, was intolerable; to prevent the light from increasing her suffering, Rebecca retired to a completely darkened cell. When the stabs of pain became more violent she only said: "For the glory of God, in communion with Christ's Passion! In communion with the crown of thorns that was placed on your head, O Lord!".

When all treatment proved useless, she went to the parish priest of Ser'el who had some renown as a doctor, but he too failed. Sister Ursula called one of her relatives who was a doctor and was doing his military service in Batrun in the mountains and he, after giving her a careful examination, pronounced the diagnosis: "The pain in the eye of this sister is indescribable because it is in the nerve, a cure is quite impossible". And he added: "If I remove her right eye the pain will move to the left, which is already showing signs of deterioration".

To leave nothing untried, Sister Rebecca, accompanied by an uncle of Sister Ursula, was sent to Beirut. In Gebail they met Father Estefan who advised her to consult an American doctor who was there. He strongly advised the removal of the infected eye. Rebecca made no difficulty about this but wanted

the permission of her superior and after this was delayed Father Estefan persuaded her to have the operation. And here is the account of Father Estefan, for which I excuse myself to sensitive readers: "Before the operation I asked the doctor to anaesthetize the eye so that Rebecca would not feel any pain, but she refused. The doctor made her sit down and pushed a long scalpel as sharp as a needle into her eye and pulled it towards himself. The eye popped out and fell on the ground, palpitating slightly". A flow of blood immediately gushed out of the horrible cavity. Rebecca "didn't complain, nor was she upset, but only said: 'in communion with Christ's Passion'. As if she had been done a great favour, her only thought was to thank the doctor with the traditional formula: "May God preserve your hands. May God reward you".

The horrified and very indignant Father Estefan was of a completely different opinion: "For my part, he said, when I saw the painful spectable, the barbarity of which would have split rocks (it would, that is, have moved a heart of stone), almost out of my mind, I don't know what I said to the doctor. I assailed him with bitter and heavy complaints and I deplored his barbaric operation with all my strength. He was overwhelmed, was afraid, and slipped away. Rebecca, with her hand covering her eye to try to stop the flow of blood, could neither rest nor sleep. When she saw me again, she said: Did you pay the doctor's fee?" She took out her purse and asked the priest to pay the debt. Father Estefan, who could never forgive himself for having been, albeit involuntarily, the cause of the havoc, was furious: "Do you want me to pay him because he has gouged one of your eyes out? The doctor has disappeared".

A blind woman, rich in light

Rebecca was finally taken to Beirut where the doctors were able to stop the haemorrhage in her right eye. The pain was then all concentrated in her left eye, for which there was nothing to be done.

When she returned to the monastery, Sister Ursula asked her how the operation went, and she replied; "I agreed to have the operation to make Father Estefan happy, and when the doctor removed my eye, which fell on the ground, with my other eye I was able to see a little and saw it palpitating and moving on the ground. I saw stars in the empty socket and felt a pain that I cannot describe. The floor was spinning under my feet".

Rebecca neither emphasized nor minimized the pain; she described it almost with cold objectivity, simply accepted it, without making a tragedy of it or seeking comfort for it. For this reason the other sisters in the community maintained that the Lord was supporting her with special grace.

Gradually her left eye shrunk and sunk into its socket. Rebecca became blind and remained so for about thirty years, during which both sockets continued to haemorrhage two or three times a week; frequent nose-bleeds left her without a shred of physical energy and reduced her to skin and bone. When she felt a tingling in her head, which always preceeded a haemorrhage, she used to say: "Here is my cousin coming to visit me".

Her head, her brow, her eyes, her nose were as if they were being pierced by a red-not-needle.

Despite her very serious handicap, Rebecca did not isolate herself from the community, busying herself with the things she could despite the great difficulty. She particularly occupied herself by spinning wool and cotton and knitting stockings for the other sisters; she took part in choral prayer, reciting the

Breviary and the other prayers from memory. Surrounded with the admiration and sisterly concern of the other nuns, she never weighed on anyone; the other sisters, edified by her unalterable serenity and the delicacy of her feelings, by the gratitude she demonstrated towards them, considered it a privilege to assist her. In spiritual conversations during recreation, her observations and counsel were accepted with great respect because they emerged not only from her intelligence and her profound spiritual experience but were backed up by an example more convincing than any words. A distinguished theologian who died a few years ago and who had written book after book on God and the lives of the saints, nailed to a bed of suffering, confessed that it is one thing to speak about the Cross and another to be on the Cross.

The last nest of the wounded dove

The monastery of St. Simon is 1,200 metres above sea-level, exposed to strong winds and the winter snow-storms. Rebecca felt the cold terribly and the thick smoke from the wood burnt to heat the rooms aggravated the constant pain in her eyes, to the point that she was obliged to stay in her cell. The superior decided to let her spend the coldest months on the mild Lebanese coast where Rebecca was first of all the guest of the Sisters of Charity and then of the residence of the Maronite Order. But she left her own monastery with regret because in the houses that lovingly took her in it was not possible to observe the Rule; she therefore asked to be taken to the monastery of St. Elias at El Rass which belonged to her Order. The superior general immediately granted her permission but because of the lack of space in the house it was necessary to put her up in the parlour. On her return to St. Simon's, the other sisters were amazed at this treatment but she silenced them: "They had no room and I had no right to ask anything

of them. May God grant them prosperity": a pure oriental formula wishing someone well.

In 1897, after two years of complete blindness, Rebecca moved to another monastery. Sister Ursula was suffering from arthritic pains and the doctor had advised her to spend the winter in a milder climate. After a stay in her native village of Ma'ad, four hundred metres above sea-level, Sister Ursula greatly improved so that the doctor decided it was necessary for her to move from St. Simon's. Her brother Ignatius, a priest, with the assistance of another priest from Ma'ad, bought a little house with a piece of land attached and extended it, adding another storey, to make it a monastery with the title of Mar-Yussef (St. Joseph) of Gerabta. Among the nuns detached from St. Simon's, with Sister Ursula who was elected superior, there was her aunt Tecla, a nun too, who asked not to be separated from her old mistress and teacher at Ma'ad, Sister Rebecca. Besides they were not carrying a dead weight, but a treasure-store of virtues, who would be the blessing of the new convent. Out of obedience Sister Rebecca moved from St. Simon's to St. Joseph's where she remained for the remaining seventeen years of her life.

Even after successive remodelling the monastery still preserves its austere lines, unadorned by architectural friezes and is situated in a temperate area, about three hundred metres above sea-level, surrounded by forests of oak and fragrant pine. To the west, a widening gully leads down from the hills to the sea; to the north, a flight of artificial terraces — a witness of the patient toil of the men of the White Mountain — planted with orchards and vineyards; to the south, a precipice overlooks the valley where the nuns go to draw drinking water from a spring.

Rebecca saw nothing of this small world of natural beauty; all she could do was recall the distant memory of her years of teaching in the village of Ma'ad.

The monastery of Mar-Yussef at Gerabta

The ascent to Calvary

In St. Joseph's monastery, Sister Rebecca had another "visit" from God, that to some people could even appear too severe; in fact, the Lord knew he could place his trust in Rebecca and did not intend to give up enriching her with grace and favours that would be poured in the veins of the Church, the Spouse of the Crucified One.

The superior, Sister Ursula, recounts that towards 1907 Rebecca confided in her: "I feel a pain in my legs, as if someone were sticking lances in them and pain in my toes as if they were being pulled off". Her body failed even more, with only her face retaining any colour, with vestiges of a former

beauty. She could no longer stand up and had to remain in bed.

Then began a litany of suffering, a mounting sequence of very severe pain that never left her for more than seven years, until her death. Rebecca was like an immobile rock, altar and holocaust together.

On the basis of direct evidence and on the posthumous examination of Rebecca's remains in 1927, we are obliged to draw attention to a rapid and hallucinating description of what happened to the Blessed from 1907 onwards, leaving to the imagination getting an idea of the abyss of suffering into which Rebecca plunged, falling — as St. Augustine says — in God, in an abyss of love.

In simple words, Rebecca became paralysed. The cause was the progressive disarticulation of her bones. She kept intact only her brain, her tongue, her ears and her wrist and finger joints, while the pain continued in her head, her devastated eye-sockets, and her nosebleeds.

A deep and suppurating sore twenty centimetres long appeared on her back, under her left shoulder-blade, "as round as the moon". Rebecca was forced to lie on her right side without her shoulders touching the mattress as her left collar-bone had slipped, sinking into her neck and blocking any movement: a reef in a sea of suffering. Her vertebrae stuck out of the sore on her left shoulder and could be counted; in the final year of her life her spine seemed to be bent in two. A festering abscess at the level of her sacrum was the cause of atrocious spasmic pains. Her right hip became dislocated and at the same time her knee became rigid; when her left hip became dislocated too, the head of her femur pierced her skin. Her legs and feet could not be separated without producing abrasions. Rebecca's whole body seemed to be falling apart. The sisters who looked after her said that when they were changing the bed linen they had to pick up that poor relic of a

tremendous shipwreck in a blanket and didn't dare to lay her down "for fear that one of her limbs would fall off".

Completely immobile, her lower jaw touched her benumbed knees.

In a medical report published in 1981 on the basis of evidence for the Canonical Process, three specialists in ophthalmology, neurology and orthopaedics diagnosed the most likely cause as a tuberculosis with ocular localisation and multiple bony excrescences.

Crucified with Christ

The powerful resource than enabled Sister Rebecca to face her tempest of suffering so heroically was her desire to make Christ's Passion her own, reproducing it in her individual mangled members. Her state of mind was borne out by the invocations that streamed from her lips when the pain became most unbearable. If her shoulder devastated by the sore stung, she thought of Christ on his way to Calvary: "With the wound on your shoulder, Jesus!" If her heads was hammering: "With your crown of thorns, Jesus!" And when a red-hot pain racked her whole body: "With the sufferings caused by the lance... by the thorns... by the nails of the Cross, my Lord Jesus!" She repeated unceasingly: "In communion with your suffering, Jesus!" And at times she added: "I crucified Jesus; everything that happens to me in this world is little, for I am a sinner". She could repeat with the Apostle Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ: the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me: and my present bodily life is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and sacrificed himself for me" (Gal. 2,20)... "I bear the marks of Jesus branded on my body" (Gal. 6,17) "This is my way of helping to complete, in my poor human flesh, the full tale of Christ's afflictions still to

be endured, for the sake of his body which is the Church" (Col. 1,24). Christ, who cannot suffer in his assumed humanity with his ressurection into glory, continues to suffer in those who, "conquered" (Phil. 3,12) by his underserved love consider it a singular grace to be able to share truly in his cruel sacrifice. Then, the abundance of suffering becomes an abundance of consolation (cf. 2 Cor. 1,5).

"The Redeemer suffered in place of man and for man. Every man has his own share in the Redemption. Each one is also called to share in that suffering through which the Redemption was accomplished. He is called to share in that suffering through which all human suffering has also been redeemed. In bringing about the Redemption, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ" (*Salvifici doloris*, no. 19).

Sister Rebecca was not a poor creature engulfed by a vortex of suffering but very close to Christ, to his example and to his intentions, she was because of this very close to the suffering of her brethren, a member of the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church.

"If one becomes a sharer in the sufferings of Christ, this happens because Christ has opened his suffering to man, because he himself in his redemptive suffering has become, in a certain sense, a sharer in all human sufferings. Man, discovering through faith, the redemptive suffering of Christ, also discovers in it his own sufferings; he rediscovers them, through faith, enriched with a new content and new meaning" (*Salvifici doloris*, no. 20).

Not everyone has so much and such illumined faith to discover and to live this sorrowful, and at the same time glorious, mystery; but no-one must be amazed or still less scandalized, if the saints, having discovered it, abandon themselves body and soul to the Cross. They "Know Christ's

voice and follow him" (Jn. 10,4) to the extreme consequence with the deep conviction that they could not better come to succour their brothers because they too know the secret of the suffering that redeems.

The Church, the People of God, is unceasingly constructing itself as the Body of Christ, in which it unites itself with sorrowful mankind. "The sufferings of Christ created the good of the world's redemption. This good in itself is inexhaustile and infinite. No man can add anything to it. But at the same time, in the mystery of the Church, as his Body, Christ has in a sense opened his own redemptive suffering to all human suffering. In so far as man becomes a sharer in Christ's sufferings — in any part of the world and at any time in history — to that extent he in his own way completes the suffering through which Christ accomplished the Redemption of the world. (*Salvifici doloris,* no. 24).

This mysterious participation is not passive resignation but conscious acceptance, a desire of love, hunger for redemption. A sister who for eighteen years lived with Rebecca gave this testimony: "When I sat beside her, blind and paralysed, I said to her: Are you not afflicted and troubled by the condition you are in? And she answered me: What comes from God we must accept with complete resignation, submission and gratitude. The vessel is patron of its clay. Let his will be done. Whatever he has done to me, I am happy because it is to expiate my sins. If he dislocates and crushes my bones, let his will be done".

Two mysterious pauses

On the feast of Corpus Christi in an unspecified year, Sister Ursula went to Blessed Rebecca's cell to ask her how she felt: "Ah, mother superior, she replied, if only I could attend holy mass on this great feast-day!" Deeply moved, the superior

decided to make her happy and have her carried into the church, but it was impossible to move her from her bed. Sister Ursula then sought to calm her, saying that her condition dispensed her from any obligation. But when the eucharistic celebration had barely commenced the sisters, amazed, saw Rebecca crawling through the door of the chapel. They all rushed to her but she stopped them with a movement of her hand. She was laid down on a pillow in the middle of the chapel while all the sisters asked themselves how Rebecca, with her poor disarticulated body, could have got out of bed alone and reached the chapel.

After mass, they were preparing to carry her back very carefully to her cell, but she begged the superior: "Mother, I beseech you, leave me in the chapel to pray because I cannot always come. I will tell you when you have to come for me". Towards midday, Sister Ursula, thinking that there was perhaps a sudden and unexpected improvement, said to her: "As you came here alone, can you return alone to your cell?" Rebecca willingly tried but it was impossible and Sister Ursula asked her again: "How did you manage to come to the chapel by yourself?" With complete simplicity Rebecca replied: "I don't know. I asked God to help me and suddenly I felt myself slipping from the bed with my legs hanging down; I fell on the floor and crawled to the chapel".

On another occasion, the superior, feeling pity for Sister Rebecca's terrible sufferings and perhaps to fathom her virtues, said to her: "Do you want something on this earth? Would you like to see?" An she replied: "I would like to see for at least an hour, to be able to look at you"... "Only an hour, and then go back to being blind?"... "Yes". And the superior gazing at Rebecca's spent eyes, saw her smiling. "Look, I can see now, the blind Rebecca suddenly said. Sister Ursula could not believe her and to make sure that it was not a tearful illusion she put her to the test, asking her if she could identify

the objects that were on a piece of furniture facing her. Rebecca pointed them out without hesitation: "The Sacred Scriptures and the Meadow of the Elect (a collection of the lives of the saints). The two books were in fact there; then she pointed out a pink stain on her bed-cover and placed her finger on it. Shortly after this she fell into a deep sleep, as if she was in a faint. "I shook her — the superior recounts — and I called her, but she continued to sleep calmly, without moving, and she stayed like this for about two hours. I kept calling till she awoke and I said to her: What's this fainting about? Can you still see? She replied: I went into a large building decorated with flowers with some other people. The ceiling was shining with light. In the building there were beautiful baths full of water and the people were crowding into them. I went with them, very happy to see the spectacle. — Why did you come back and not keep on walking? — You called me, and I came". The following day Sister Ursula insisted that she should tell her what she had seen in the building: "I cannot describe what I saw; it is impossible for me to express the pleasure I felt at the spectacle and I shall always think about it with great joy".

In order to understand Sister Rebecca's desire to see so that she could look her superior in the face and her returning on hearing the Mother's voice, it is necessary to know that for a nun the superior, as the Rule puts it, represents Christ and is owed respect, obedience and love. Despite her condition, Rebecca did nothing without the superior's permission: she did not eat, she did not fast, she didn't look after herself without her express orders. When she was only blind she asked the superior's permission to help the other sisters in the kitchen and laundry, otherwise she was quite happy spinning and knitting. She was not only a model of obedience to everyone but also a mistress. Once a novice was keeping her company, quite content to sew; the prayer bell sounded and the novice did not get up immediately. The needle snapped in her fingers.

"Do you know why the needle broke? Because you didn't stop sewing when the bell sounded, and she reminded her of the episode of a monk who, while he was ending a letter, left his signature half finished when he heard the bell calling him to prayer. When he returned he saw his name had been completed in letters of gold.

To the same novice who was late going into church because she found the Syriac language used in the Maronite liturgy harsh, she said: "Quick, go to the choir where you are being called by obedience: never crush the blossom of obedience".

These little charming monastic stories indicate Rebecca's total availability to the things of God, a practice of perfection that set the tone for her every thought, her every action, and maintained her daily heroism.

Reduced to a human wreck, she did not consider she was dispensed from the obligations of the Rule. "Sister, her superior assured her, you are old, blind and impotent and you are not obliged to do anything; the Rule dispensed you from work". With a streak of humour, Rebecca replied: "There is not one Rule for the young and one for the old. Am I perhaps dispensed from chastity, poverty and obedience (the three monastic vows) and from humility because I am old? I believe that a nun who can work should do something and I feel I am capable of baking bread". She was then only blind and gave a hand in the kitchen. To the superior who warned her to close the door well when she returned from the heated bakery to her freezing cell, she replied: "I beg you: when Christ was lying in the grotto on a pile of straw was there perhaps a door preventing the wind from reaching him? However, I shall do as you wish". If the superior insisted that she should be seen by the doctor who was visiting the monastery, she would say: "Please, don't do so much; my doctor is God", or, joking, "My body is all out of joint and the doctor does not have screws to put it together again".

A Domenican and a Franciscan who were charged with making the Apostolic Visit, a control that the spiritual and material running of the monastery was in order, were very pleased to spend some time with Rebecca. To tease her, the Dominican told her that the superior and the other sisters were tired of her; Rebecca replied with a quotation from the Gospel: "Have you perhaps come to set a daughter against her mother, a young wife against her mother-in-law?" (Mt. 10,35).

To her solemn visitors who insisted on knowing if she needed anything: "I am treated better — she said — than the Queen of England". One day the two Fathers presented themselves unexpectedly in the sewing room; the Franciscan asked: "And how is the Queen of England? What does she need? Today she is resting on two cushions, and where are her jewels?" "Here they are" Rebecca quickly replied, taking the box with the spindle and the hanks of thread in her hands. The priest opened the box and began fiddling around with the spindle; the superior told her smiling that he was mixing up the thread and she, with an air of reproval said: "Father, please, don't tangle the thread". Episodes of no apparant significance but indicative of the serenity and even of the astuteness that made Rebecca, a sick woman, — and what a sick woman — dispense smiles instead of melancholy. Usually sick people are called "patients" only because they are placed under the care of the doctor, but as for the virtue of patience, this is quite another story.

Farewell to the world

Three days before her death Sister Rebecca had some difficulty in speaking, but she was, as always, calm and collected. "I am not afraid of death which I have waited for for a long time. God will let me live through my death". As the

The grave of Blessed Rafqa

hour approached she received the sacrament of the sick with immense joy and with complete possession of her mental faculties. It was the evening and the superior asked her if she also wished to receive the Viaticum, but as she had already received communion in the morning she asked that it should be postponed until the next day in order to observe the eucharistic fast that in those days was very rigorous. Meanwhile she had passages from the *Glories of Mary* and St.

Alphonsus' *Preparation for death* read to her, savouring every phrase. At dusk she wished to take leave of the sisters in the community, asking them all for forgiveness. The superior said farewell to her for the last time and at all costs Rebecca wished to kiss her hand, as a sign of reverence and gratitude. When the chaplain of the monastery came she asked him to recite the prayers of the dying for her, then she said: "Father, you have come in from the fields and are tired, go home now and go to bed".

The nuns kept vigil with her throughout the night, reciting aloud at her request, the litanies of St. Joseph and the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin.

At dawn of the 23rd of the October 1914 she asked for the Viaticum and as long as she had breath kept repeating: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph I give you my heart and my soul". When she could no longer speak she gave the superior the agreed sign — pressure on her fingers — to receive the final absolution and the plenary indulgence. Four minutes afterwards she died, sweetly. Under the dark glasses that hid her devastated eye-sockets Rebecca's face appeared distended, placid, almost radiant.

For two days her remains — a disorderly heap of bones covered with a veil of skin — gave no sign of corruption and on the third day after the requiem mass celebrated by the Maronite monks, were laid in a very humble grave, about sixty metres from the monastery.

Sister Rebecca's fame for sanctity quickly spread throughout Lebanon; pilgrims began to pour in from all parts of the country, and not only Christians, while page after page of a register were filled with accounts of graces received thanks to her intercession.

The miracle put forward for the Beatification of Sister Rebecca was the instantaneous, complete, definitive and scientifically inexplicable curing of a Lebanese woman,

Elisabeth Ennakl, who was suffering from a cancer at the neck of her uterus which had reached its final stage with an unhappy and short-term prognosis. This took place in 1938 at Blessed Rebecca's tomb and the woman who had been granted the miracle died of a completely different illness twenty-eight years later, in 1966.

On the 9th of June 1984, the eve of Pentecost, in the presence of the Holy Father John Paul II, the decree approving the miracle, necessary for proceeding with the beatification of Sister Rebecca, was promulgated. The following day, the 10th of June, the feast of Pentecost, the Pope published his message for World Mission Sunday in which he exalted the value of Christian suffering as a privileged instrument for the redemption of all those who still do not know Christ: "For them, suffering has no sufficient explanation; it is the most depressing and inexplicable absurdity which tragically runs counter to man's aspiration to complete happiness. Only the Cross of Christ casts a ray of light on this mystery: it is only in the Cross that man can find a valid response to the anguishing question that emerges from the experience of suffering. *The saints profoundly understood this and accepted it, and sometimes even ardently desired to be associated with the Lord's Passion.* Making the words of the Apostle their own: "This is my way of helping to complete, in my poor human flesh, the full tale of Christ's afflictions still to be endured, for the sake of his Body which is the Church" (Col. 1,24).

Certain exceptional vocations, like that of Blessed Rebecca, certain vertiginous acts of heroism carried out through special impulses of grace do not require to be imitated. They remain as outstanding models to which, in different degrees, all those who believe in the Gospel of the Cross can come close, giving their sufferings an authentically Christian value "in the terrible battle between the forces of good and evil, revealed to our eyes

by our modern world may your suffering in union with the Cross of Christ be victorious!" (*Salvifici doloris,* no. 31).

Sister Rebecca, therefore, is not extraneous to the deepest needs of our times and of our world. She is one of us, someone like us, like millions of creatures who suffer, in need of the light of hope. For her intercession to God she is someone for us, starting with her martyred native land.

Her Beatification also has another significance. On the 9th of October 1977, Paul VI raised to the honours of the altars a hermit, St. Gharbel Makhlouf (1828-1898) who belonged to the same Lebanese Maronite Order as Blessed Rebecca. Both of them were glorified in accordance with the Roman procedure in force in the Catholic Church; two splendid flowers of the Lebanon who blossomed forth on the ancient branch of the purest traditional of eastern sanctity. "What a symbol — Paul VI exclaimed — of the union between the East and the West. What a sign of ecclesial brotherhood between Christians throughout the whole world!".

For further information about Lebanon cf. S. GAROFALO, *Il Profumo del Libano St. Charbel Makhlouf.* III edit., Rome 1977 by the POSTULAZIONE DELL'ORDINE LIBANESE MARONITA, Piazza Nicoloso di Recco, 5, 00154, Rome, from where other information about Blessed Rebecca can also be obtained.

INDEX

A message for our times 3
A daughter of Lebanon 4
The courage of deciding 7
The first experience of religious life 9
A new path 11
Finally the target 13
A strange request to God 16
The mystery of suffering 17
And God responded 19
A blind woman, rich in light 22
The last nest of the wounded dove 23
The ascent to Calvary 25
Crucified with Christ 27
Two mysterious pauses 29
Farewell to the world 33

Tip. S.G.S. - Istituto Pio XI - P.zza S. M. Ausiliatrice, 54 - Roma - Tel. 7827819